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SUBJECT: ASSESSING THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TRIBAL SUPPORT COUNCILS IN SOUTHERN IRAQ

REF: A. BAGHDAD 3932

- 1B. BAGHDAD 3918
- 1C. BAGHDAD 3851
- 1D. BAGHDAD 3744
- 1E. BASRAH 40

Classified By: Pol Min Couns Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is the second in a series of messages examining Support Councils, their impact on Iraqi politics and security, and implications for USG policy.

11. (C) Summary: At the direction of Prime Minister Maliki, Support Councils (SC) (Arabic: majilis al-isnad) were first established in Maysan and Basra in conjunction with ISF security operations in March and May 2008. The first Support Council, established in Basra, didn't develop much due to infighting among Baghdad-based Iraqi government players. Subsequently, an office under the Prime Minister took over setting them up and had real success doing so. That success also created controversy. The Prime Minister's team said that SCs were designed to promote security and reconciliation, and even to help with resettlement of internally displaced persons. In practice, however, southern SCs have flourished mostly in provinces with limited security and reconciliation needs, leaving them open to allegations (chiefly by Prime Minister Maliki's Shia rival, the ISCI party) that the SCs are designed to buy political support for Maliki in advance of the provincial elections. In other areas SCs show signs of being able to fulfill their objectives, even though they have sparked inter-Shi'a and intra-tribal tensions. End summary.

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Genesis: Basra and Maysan  
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12. (C) While the Support Council concept is not new, the first GOI attempt to create SCs in their current form occurred in Basra in the spring of 2008 in the wake of Operation Charge of the Knights. After Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) encountered stiff resistance from Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) units, the GOI turned both to Coalition Forces (CF) and to Basra tribes for support (ref E). The PM is said to have approved the establishment of several tribal brigades, which worked in partnership with ISF units to turn the tide of battle. In exchange, the PM promised the Basra tribes considerable support and patronage. Acting Minister of Justice Safa al Din al-Safi attempted to establish 20 SCs in the province as a means of rewarding tribal figures in Basra post-kinetic reconstruction efforts (for which he was given a budget of \$100 million). The Implementation and Follow-up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR), part of the PM's office, attempted to become involved in organizing and funding the Basra SCs, but, as IFCNR chairman Muhamad Salman confirmed to poloff, Safi has successfully blocked them from doing so. This lack of coordination has led to a generally agreed failure of the SCs in Basra. Ironically, Basra now has the weakest SC network in the South.

¶3. (C) The GOI applied lessons from Basra when it continued activities against JAM in Maysan. IFCNR directly organized the SCs in Maysan, negotiating with tribal leaders in the lead-up to ISF operations in June. Tribal leaders agreed to hand over members of their tribes involved with JAM and assisted ISF units in efforts to uncover weapons caches and arms facilitation networks. In return, the GOI agreed to show leniency towards those individuals turned over by the tribes and to provide financial assistance by establishing 17 SCs after the operation. By account of IFCNR and ISF officials, the promise to create Councils played a helpful role in dismantling JAM control over the province. The 17 SCs in Maysan are now active and operational -- though some QSCs in Maysan are now active and operational -- though some provincial figures consider them controversial and ineffective (see para 9).

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The Grand Design  
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¶4. (C) Building on their success in Maysan, IFCNR quickly began organizing and funding SCs throughout the South before establishing a legal basis for their existence (ref D). The councils, designed to include both tribal leaders and local VIPs, were given a broader mandate than what was emphasized in Maysan/Basra. A July 2008 IFNCR memo established the following Support Council goals:

- Spread security and achieve stability by energizing the populace against terrorists and outlawed individuals;
- Intervene in solving tribal conflicts by reconciliation and follow up;

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- Accomplish the return of displaced families to their homes and assist in meeting their needs;
- Consult on utility and building project needs in the area;
- Support national reconciliation in the area by consulting with political opposition parties, recalling employees of the defunct government and tracking detainees who have not been convicted by the law.

By October, according to MNF-I and ISF sources (and informal PRT reporting), every Southern province except Basra had at least 10 functional SCs, consisting of roughly 20 members per Council. Upon formation, each SC began receiving monthly payments from IFCNR, generally within the range of 8 to 10 million Iraqi Dinar per month, with each individual member getting around 500,000 dinar (\$400).

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Political Animals  
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¶5. (C) With strong GoI backing, Support Councils spread quickly throughout the South. The growth raised questions about whether they were an appropriate vehicle through which to pursue IFCNR's stated objectives, or whether PM Maliki really intended them for such purposes at all.

Interestingly, many of the South Central provinces that reported especially quick SC development -- Karbala, Najaf, Diwaniyah, Muthanna, DhiQar -- lack the kind of sectarian or security problems that drove SC formation initially. These provinces are overwhelmingly Shi'a, do not have serious displaced family issues, and have few post-kinetic rebuilding projects. The ISF made great strides over the past two years in improving security in these provinces, and all were under Provincial Iraqi Control by autumn 2008. To illustrate this point, both the Karbala ISF chief and the Najaf Iraqi Police chief told poloff in November that they had no problem working with the SCs, but that the Support Councils provided no value added on security issues beyond cooperation with tribes that had already been taking place.

¶6. (C) The SC program immediately drew sharp response from

two sets of critics: ISCI and disaffected tribal sheikhs. As detailed in ref D and elsewhere, ISCI has accused PM Maliki of using SCs to purchase tribal support for his Da'wa party in advance of the provincial elections, in which the parties are running on separate lists. SCs in ISCI-dominated provinces have become increasingly active in the past month, organizing marches in several provinces for various causes (including support of the US-Iraq Security Agreement). None of these have provoked violence from ISCI or its Badr militia. Badr leaders in Najaf, Basra, and Hillah provinces who met with Senior Advisor Gray in late 2008 argued that SCs gave Maliki an unfair competitive advantage. They did not give the impression, however, that they view SCs as a threat to their security. What really worries them, as ISCI Najaf Governor Abu Gelal told Gray, is that Maliki is getting too popular for ISCI's comfort.

¶ 17. (C) The SC program also divides tribal leadership, since many middling tribal figures have joined while senior sheikhs declined invitations. Muhammad al-Habib, the Wasit-based Prince of the Rabi'a tribal federation, expressed the commonly heard senior sheikh perspective when he told Gray on December 11 that SCs are a political support program that pays tribesmen and gives them a set of paper responsibilities that resemble those of sheikhs, thus elevating their status. Sami Hamza al-Abdullah, also from Wasit, told the PRT in December that "we used to have three sheikhs in our tribe. Now with Maliki we have about 30." (ref B) Divisions among tribal leaders, while evident in every province, have not shown any signs of degenerating into violence. Also, it is worth noting that whether tribal leaders favor SCs or not, they consistently agree that the program is one of many signs that the Maliki government has become more nationalist in character -- a trait universally supported by the tribes.

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Security and Reconciliation?  
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¶ 18. (C) While a poor fit in some southern provinces, SCs have more clearly defined security and reconciliation roles in others. Not everyone agrees on how effective SCs have been in these roles, however. Maysan province features vast swamps along the Iranian border that make it a key transit point for lethal aid and insurgents; tribal cooperation for security matters is vital. In recent months, however, Maysani tribal leaders and politicians from various parties have complained to the PRT that the SCs over represent minor tribal leaders from the less-vulnerable northern parts of the province, and that SCs provide very little value in patrolling the crucial marsh areas south of Amarah. Sheikh

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Abed al-Kareem al-Mohammedawi, aka the Prince of the Marshes, called the SCs little more than a Maliki re-election program (ref C). PRT, ISF, and MNF-I units active in the province have all commented that they see little evidence that the SCs provide a continuing security benefit.

¶ 19. (C) While demographics have limited the SC role in reconciliation activities in most Southern provinces, Babil, with its large Sunni minority, stands as an exception. At least two SCs in the province (Hillah, Mussayib) feature cross-sectarian membership; both work on SOI transition strategies, IDP returns, and similar issues. Key tribal leaders have expressed support for the program, including the province's leading Sunni sheikh, Adnan Janabi, who in a recent meeting with the PRT and DCG-S praised the SC program and PM Maliki for transcending sectarian divisions (ref A). SC activity has also brought Da'wa and the Sunnis closer together, adding fuel to the budding Da'wa-ISCI rivalry. In a December 15 meeting with Gray, Abu Ahmed al-Basri, the PM's provincial representative, spoke glowingly of cooperation between the two sides and even expected Da'wa to win Sunni votes in the provincial elections.

¶10. (C) Note: Inter-Shi'a reconciliation, including integration of former Shi'a insurgents, has not been emphasized as a SC objective thus far. IFCNR Chairman Salman told poloff, however, that SCs may play a greater role in this area in the future, especially if the PM's Office successfully concludes ongoing reconciliation negotiations with JAM and related militia groups. SCs already play a role in this process by turning in tribal members with militia ties in exchange for more lenient treatment for the offender by GOI/ISF and CF. End note.

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Support Council Alternatives  
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¶11. (C) Since SCs do not have legal basis, both critics and supporters of the program have suggested legislative solutions. Dagher al-Shebibi al-Mousawi (ISCI), the Basra-based Chairman of Parliament's Tribal Affairs Committee, explained in December that he has developed legislation to move SCs from the PM's office to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (which would be elevated to a full ministry by the legislation). The Ministries of Interior and Defense would also have a supervisory role in this plan. Committee members from the Iraqiyah party (from Karbala and Diwaniyah) recently expressed to poloff support for this type of approach, as did Babil Provincial Council Chairman Muhammad al-Masoudi, an independent. Notably, none of these critics calls for abolishing the SCs entirely; politicians in southern Iraq generally see the need for some form of tribal engagement with the central government.

¶12. (C) Within the PM's office, Dr. Abbud al-Issawi, one of the initial architects of the SC program, has drafted his own legislative proposal to codify the SCs essentially in their current form. Separately, Muhammad al-Urabi, Minister of State for Tribal Affairs, told poloff in early January of plans to present draft legislation to the Council of Ministers creating a National Tribal Council whose appointed members would represent Iraq's largest tribal federations, linking with provincial tribal councils that could over time absorb the GOI's current SC structure.

¶13. (C) In Basra, where the SC program has floundered, ISF, MNF-I, and local leaders have discussed new methods of organizing tribal leaders for security purposes. Dagher al-Moussawi confirmed December reports that tribal leaders have been discussing with ISF the creation of armed tribal levies in the swamp areas north of Basra city. According to Dagher (and MNF-I sources), the units would be armed and paid by either the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police -- it has not been determined yet which -- and would be specific to Basra province. CF and ISF are also establishing 'community centers' in marsh villages to aid both economic development and border patrol activities. No further progress has been noted on this plan in early January.

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Comment: Crafting USG Policy on Isnads and Tribal Engagement  
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¶14. (C) The Embassy and MNF-I are working to develop coordinated policy toward SCs, recognizing the need to bring tribes into Iraq's governance and security structures, but also recognizing that the Councils have shown only modest ability to achieve their objectives and will continue to be a lightning rod in a year filled with provincial, constitutional, and parliamentary elections. MNC-I FRAGO 268 on tribal engagement, approved in December, authorizes CF to

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work with the SCs as appropriate, but does not call for reconstruction projects through SCs, nor does it request PRTs in the Iranian border provinces to directly engage the SCs.

PRTs in the southern provinces, meanwhile, continue to meet with SC members, especially those with whom they have a pre-existing relationship, but are not carrying out projects (such as QRF projects) with SCs.

¶115. (C) While Support Councils have grown rapidly in the Southern provinces due to political exigencies; their central functions -- reconciliation, security, IDP returns, and reconstruction -- theoretically have the potential to be more applicable to mixed-sect Baghdad, Diyala, and Salah-ad-Din provinces. However, prospects for inflaming sectarian tensions could also be proportionately much higher in these areas, especially as the SCs approach Kurdish territory (witness the late 2008 very public spat between GOI Shi'a and Kurds over SCs in Kirkuk). The next message in this series will examine the development and role of SCs in Central Iraq.

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